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NEOLIBERAL CAPITALISM'S DESTRUCTION OF DEMOCRACY

THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY: NEOLIBERAL CAPITALISM, AUTHORITARIANISM AND RECLAIMING DEMOCRACY

Michelle Williams

The crisis of democracy is undeniable, registering in rising authoritarianism, the politics of hate and exclusion, right-wing populist movements, distrust of fact-based information and news, and the withering of accountable state institutions. Less obvious is that democracy's destruction is not simply a problem of politics requiring political solutions. Fixing politics, restoring democratic sensibilities (including fact-based decision making), enhancing democratic publics and overcoming a politics of hate will not save democracy – though these are all important and worth restoring – because the sources of democracy's destruction lie in systemic, intersecting crises combining four strands: the economy, ecology, social reproduction and politics. Democracy's destruction is one manifestation of the broader crisis created by neoliberal capitalism.¹ By neoliberal capitalism I am not only referring to economic liberalisation, including privatising state assets, liberalising markets (including labour markets), deregulating financial institutions, the ascendancy of transnational regulatory agencies and dismantling state welfare support systems. I am also referring to what Wendy Brown (2015: 15) calls neoliberal rationality, assigning economic metrics to all aspects of life, including non-human life, where the state, non-human nature, society and social reproduction are valued in terms of their contribution to economic interests.

It is commonplace to say that capitalism experiences periodic crises. History is testament to this. It is less common to acknowledge that capitalism actually generates

these crises through the way in which it organises economic activity (what Marxists call the contradictions within production). It is even less common to see the crises generated in capitalism's contradictions in what Nancy Fraser (2018) calls the interrealm boundaries – that is, the economy's relation to non-human nature, to the necessary conditions of social reproduction, and to political power and the state. Similar to the contradictions within production that Marx highlighted, these inter-realm contradictions are inherent to capitalism, as it has self-destabilising dynamics across the social matrix of capitalist society. When crises occur simultaneously in all four realms, they combine into a systemic crisis, and, as history has shown, capitalism is vulnerable to structural transformations that result in new ways of organising production and in the economy's relation to nature, politics and social reproduction (see Fraser 2014, 2018). Each of capitalism's four major historical periods² has established particular forms of organising social relations, with each resulting in particular contradictions. Democracy's fate is thus tethered to the larger social matrix that includes the organisation of social relations in the economy and the interrealm spaces between the economy and nature, the economy and social reproduction, and the economy and politics. Yet, the crisis of democracy demands our attention because democratic political power is essential to resolving the crises in the other realms. In fact, democracy is essential for any transformative politics that seeks social, ecological, economic and political justice. How democracy's crisis is resolved is linked to the capacity of society and the state to push for new forms of organising our social world and hence limiting the economy's power over these other realms.

This chapter looks at the crisis of democracy and highlights that the ways in which it is resolved have important implications for finding prefigurative alternatives beyond capitalism. I question whether democracy is an ideal worth fighting for by interrogating what it is, and then show the ways in which democracy's current crisis manifests in politics. I conclude by suggesting the necessity of prefigurative initiatives reconstituting democratic power by building anti-capitalist social relations in the interstitial spaces within and beyond capitalism.

CONTESTATION WITHIN/OVER DEMOCRACY

On 12 December 2019, the Hindu fundamentalist government in India under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) passed a Citizenship Amendment Act that offers refuge and possibly citizenship to persecuted religious minorities, except for Muslims, in some neighbouring

countries. When this Act is placed alongside the proposed National Register of Citizens, it will require many Indian Muslims to prove that they qualify as Indian citizens, effectively dismantling the secular foundations of India's democracy.

On 15 December, three days after passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act, and in the shadow of growing police brutality against students protesting the Act, a large group of primarily women and children began a sit-in in an area of Delhi known as Shaheen Bagh. As the sit-in grew, it became a site for rehearsing a new vision of citizenship – the women were collectively redefining fundamental democratic notions of freedom, equality and solidarity.

These two simultaneous and ongoing episodes in Indian politics capture what is at stake in the bifurcated politics coursing through polities across the world. These developments reflect in the election of exclusionary neo-fascist political leaders in places such as the US,³ Poland, Hungary, Turkey, Brazil and India. Populist (and fascist) movements in western Europe such as the *Alternative für Deutschland* in Germany and the *League Party* in Italy, and the *Economic Freedom Fighters* in South Africa, raise exclusionary appeals that resonate with large numbers of precarious people abandoned by traditional political parties. The rise of these movements through electoral democratic systems raises questions about the merits of democracy. At the same time, the second decade of the twenty-first century witnessed unprecedented pro-democracy protests across the world. While protests have been an important component of democratic claims-making for well over two centuries, the recent protests in Brazil, Chile, India, Egypt, Hong Kong and the US share a common thread in their resistance to the rise of authoritarian politics. The rise of authoritarian politics and the robust defence of democratic spaces simultaneously articulate narrow and exclusionary appeals as well as more expansive and inclusive notions of democracy, and are responses to capitalism's multiple crises unravelling societies' capacities to sustain life and flourish. How can such opposing forms of political practices, visions and understandings arise within and make claims to democracy?

What is democracy?

The contestation over democracy is partly because it is an ideal that allows for many permutations – radical, participatory, liberal, bourgeois – each emphasising different principles, values, procedures and institutional arrangements. Democracy is the only form of rule that sees people collectively ruling themselves. It is fundamentally different from all other forms of rule, such as plutocracy (rule by and for the rich), aristocracy, monarchy, dictatorship, fascism, vanguardism (rule by an elite within a political party) or 'corporatocracy' (rule by corporations) (George 2015: 6). When

we speak of democracy, we implicitly refer to necessary components for practising democracy and aspirational principles of democracy. Democracy has at least two essential components (administrative capacity and public legitimacy) and two primary principles (equality and liberty). Shortcomings in administrative capacity and public support weaken democracy, and understandings of equality and liberty shape the degree to which democracy can be realised.

Democracy for and by the people refers to the institutional arrangement of the state (for the people) and mechanisms for participation (by the people). Institutionally, a capable democratic state is able to develop and implement laws and public policy that reflect the broader interests of the public, including steering economic activity in the interests of society, protecting the natural world, supporting social reproduction and ensuring democratic public institutions for people's participation. The state must have the capacity to ensure that private interests, such as large corporations and the economic and political elite, comply with state regulation in the interest of the public, as well as financial accountability of public funds. Without strong, efficacious, and accountable administrative capacity within all levels of the state, democracy is undermined and eroded. Democracy also requires arenas and mechanisms for civil society and publics to engage the state around public interest and to voice public opinions about the state's regulations. State legitimacy is secured through public engagement around what constitutes the public interest and translating these interests into state policy and action. A robust, organised, engaged and informed citizenry is essential to ensuring efficacious public engagement as democracy is realised through practising it concretely. Consent of the governed is thus achieved through democratic means such as active political participation by a wide range of constituents through civil society organisations, local governmental institutions, participatory forums, and an open, free and fair media. These must ensure financial accountability and transparent and participatory budgeting, policy making and implementation processes. Thus, democracy requires both state capacity and state legitimacy (Fraser 2014).

The varied meanings of the foundational principles of equality and liberty are fundamental to the contestation within democracy. The concept of liberty ranges from non-interference to a more robust notion of independence from arbitrary power and non-domination by others. On the one side, the emphasis on liberty as non-interference sets the basis for free markets as the state should not interfere to regulate markets.⁴ Similarly, liberty as non-interference lays the basis for minimal state support in social welfare as individuals are responsible for their own development. Liberalism promotes significant universal rights such as universal suffrage, education, human rights, civil rights, and freedom of association, speech and the

press. When married to liberty as non-interference, these rights are interpreted through the lens of possessive individualism, elevating individuals above the common good. On the other side – usually associated with social justice, egalitarian liberals and republicans – law and policy can enhance freedom by curtailing the arbitrary power of others. Thus, a ‘liberty-protecting state’ ensures that no institution (including the state, corporations and markets), person or other entity has ‘arbitrary power over any citizen’ (Pettit 1997: 67). For a more expansive notion of democracy, this second idea of liberty and freedom is central as it allows state intervention to ameliorate and protect against inequalities of power and wealth, and protects citizens from arbitrary power and domination. This also implies that democratic decision making is not limited to the political sphere, as a liberty-protecting state regulates the economy and redefines the interrealm boundaries between the economy and social reproduction and non-human nature. While it too promotes universal rights, it emphasises the relativity of rights in relation to others and the collective good. Thus, the importance of a liberty-protecting state for a robust and expansive democracy cannot be overstated.

The other contested notion is equality. Liberal democracy foregrounds equality of opportunity, which assumes everyone starts from the same conditions and ignores pre-existing inequalities. Equality of opportunity together with liberty as non-interference limits state involvement in protecting the population and the natural world from the market and minimises state-supported social welfare. In this framework, individuals are free to compete equally to achieve their life choices. A more expansive notion of democracy, by contrast, defines equality in terms of outcomes and recognises the necessity for state intervention in achieving equality. The creation of high-quality public goods such as public transportation, schools, health systems and spaces for recreation and enjoyment is central to achieving equality of outcomes, as is the social wage – both income distribution and the distribution of goods and services, including forms of government support such as grants, and subsidised housing and food systems. Redistributive programmes seeking equality of outcomes by a liberty-enhancing state are essential for achieving social justice. To do this requires state administrative capacity and active citizens, and simultaneously yields state legitimacy. Thus, if a robust and expansive democracy focuses on equality of outcomes by a liberty-protecting state that ensures institutional arrangements, engaged publics, laws and policy to realise this goal, why do we not live in such a democracy?

Modern liberal democracy has largely promoted liberty as non-interference by the state and equality of opportunity. It came of age in the eighteenth century with the development of capitalism, which has charted its trajectory and governed much

of the Euro-Atlantic world (i.e. the centres of capitalism) for nearly two centuries. Liberal democracy in capitalist centres promoted the illusion of a virtuous cycle between democracy and capitalist development. Central to this relationship was the need to narrow democracy from an expansive understanding of rule by and for the people, by separating politics from the economy and limiting political participation to representation of the people by elected officials voted for in elections. Separating the economic and political spheres limits political and public oversight and state 'interference' in economic activity. As a result, a defining measure of democracy became synonymous with electoral procedures ensuring elections are transparent, accountable and inclusive of all qualified voters based on competition (i.e. equitable opportunity to compete in the election).

Limiting democratic decision making to the political realm allows corporations to operate under limited control and amass enormous power and wealth at the expense of other social realms. Fraser explains that capitalism's three fundamental divisions – the separation of production from social reproduction, the separation of humans from the non-human natural world, and the separation of economics and politics – create the illusion of spheres outside of capitalism (Fraser 2018; Fraser and Jaeggi 2018). These three spheres are the 'background' on which capitalism operates. By separating the economic from these 'decommodified' background spheres, capitalism mystifies the productive foundation on which it operates and exempts it from paying the actual costs of capitalist production.

Modern liberal democracy's imbrication with capitalism laid the basis on which capitalist markets were ensured the freedom to act in the pursuit of profits, allowed private property to become a primary site of capitalist accumulation, set the parameters for the commodification of nature, guaranteed 'free' labour to populate the factories and farms, devalued social reproduction, and justified disciplinary state order and security in the service of non-interference in the market. Democracy's liberal instantiation with capitalism gained widespread acceptance as the centres of capitalism venerated it as the 'best' form of government, while an increasing number of countries incorporated into capitalist markets. As a result, by the second decade of the twenty-first century over 100 countries claimed to be liberal democracies within the global capitalist economy.

Commonplace understandings often assume that democracy will survive no matter what, and that democratic capacities are inherent to the human condition. Both assumptions are patently untrue. For democracy in any form to thrive it must be engendered, nurtured and sustained in the institutions, practices and laws that uphold it as well as in the individuals that share in its rule. The point is worth emphasising: people must be educated into the values and practices of democracy; the

institutions, laws and policies that uphold democracy must be enacted, respected and supported; and the political parties and states that represent aggregate interests must be accountable, transparent and responsive to their public duty.

The chequered history of democracy also lies in another conceptual knot: who are 'the people'? History demonstrates that the people can be exclusively conceived – men who own property, men, whites, educated – or inclusively conceived – all citizens, all residents living in a territory, all people on Earth. Who is defined as 'the people' has important implications for what constitutes public interests and who is elected to represent them. These are essentially classification struggles, which, for Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 2000), are engaged in by the elite and the state. Yet democratic forces also challenge fundamental understandings of citizenship, work, gender, relations to nature, social reproduction, equality, economy and who counts as a citizen or worker. For example, by demystifying the background conditions on which capitalism depends, democratic forces ensure that the three inherent divisions in capitalism are laid bare in the interest of human well-being and substantive equality. Expansive democracy provides the possibility for embedding economic activity in social reproduction, the natural world (planetary boundaries) and the polity. Through recalibrating the interrealm boundaries between the economy and social reproduction, non-human nature and politics, economic activity is reimagined (and retooled) in the service of public interest and society. In other words, an expansive democracy untethered from capitalism can integrate economic activity in the entire social-ecological matrix. To do this requires direct forms of deliberation and decision making over the entire social-ecological matrix – including the economic arena – and an expansive notion of liberty that ensures the state acts to promote social, ecological and economic justice (substantive equality, inclusivity, fairness, planetary boundaries). Thus, a robust and expansive democracy reclassifies public power by extending into the economic sphere and providing the possibility for developing anti-capitalist alternatives that challenge the divisions inherent to capitalism. Throughout capitalism's history, there have been episodic attempts to do this.

Classification struggles also link to the way in which notions of inclusion and solidarity are constructed. Whether solidarity is framed in narrow, exclusionary terms or in expansive, inclusionary terms has a significant impact on the imagined community, who belongs in it and the nature of the democracy. It also has important implications for the types of struggles that cross interrealm boundaries. Negative solidarity is built on exclusionary categories of race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, religion, unions and work, and narrow issues that reinforce boundaries. These categories divide people, hierarchise groups against each other and focus on difference as bounded categories of exclusion. Solidarities built on exclusion reinforce

unequal power relations and powerful institutions that regulate our lives, such as the economy, religion, politics, patriarchy, inequality and access to economic livelihoods. It is the source of femicide, eco-cide, racism, genocide and xenophobia. The BJP's Citizens Amendment Act is a contestation over narrowing who counts as an Indian citizen by preparing the ground to disenfranchise millions of Muslims.

Another, more powerful form of solidarity, built on principles of a shared humanness, equality of all, and socio-economic and ecological justice, rejects the othering of people based on nationality, gender, race, religion, union affiliation or culture and connects interrealm boundaries across spheres of economy, polity, nature and social reproduction, as well as across capitalist centres and peripheries. It builds common ground among diverse groups and interrealm boundaries through reconstituting social relations and finding our common humanity. This requires moving beyond social categories and particular issues, to a willingness to embrace difference and expand solidarity across boundary struggles and national scales. This sort of solidarity was seen on the 20 September 2019 Global Day of Climate Action when millions of people and organisations across the planet protested for systemic change in response to the climate emergency, directly making links across boundaries of economy, democracy, care work and climate change. This is also the struggle that the women sitting in at Shaheen Bagh are waging. A robust and expansive democracy requires an inclusionary notion of the people, expansive notions of interrealm boundaries and the connections across them, and across geographical regions.

We now look at how we got to this crisis, this place of undemocratic, market democracy, before turning to the possibilities for renewing democracy.

CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY UNDER NEOLIBERAL CAPITALISM

The crisis of democracy is the political crisis generated by neoliberal capitalism. By turning everything into a potential commodity, neoliberal capitalism has elevated corporate interest within the economy and pushed into the background conditions on which capitalism depends – social reproduction, non-human nature and public power – transmogrifying them through neoliberal rationality. While particular articulations are unique to local contexts, extant cultures and political traditions, neoliberal capitalism has succeeded in framing all aspects of life in economic terms, undermining state administrative capacity and eroding state legitimacy.

There is excellent academic work cataloguing the effects of neoliberalism on the economy and the background realms of political power, social reproduction and non-human nature. Studies show polarising inequality and the rise of consumer

debt (Ferguson 2006; Krugman 2003, 2012, 2013; Piketty 2013; Reich 2010; Sachs 2012; Sen 1999; Stiglitz 2012; Williams and Satgar 2020); the commodification and destruction of human and non-human habitats (Burawoy 2013; Sachs 1999; Saito 2017; Satgar 2013, 2018); the link between fossil fuel capitalism and climate change (Malm 2016; Mann and Kump 2015; Moore 2015; Satgar 2020); the crisis of social reproduction (Cock and Luxton 2013; Elson 2012; Fraser 2016); the new constitutionalism and the power of transnational regulatory bodies and corporations over territorial states (Gill 1998); economic instability, growing numbers of permanently unemployed and increased precarity of working and middle classes (Habib and Padayachee 2000; Harvey 2005; Hudson 2012; Mirowski 2013; Smith 2010; Standing 2011, 2016); the insidious creep of neoliberal rationality on human subjectivity (Brown 2015); and the rise of corporate power (Dörre 2019; Fraser and Jaeggi 2018; George 2015; Hacker and Pierson 2011; Streek 2011; Wolin 2008).⁵

Collectively, this work demonstrates the crises generated by neoliberal capitalism in the economy, polity, social reproductive realm and non-human nature. Public and common interests have been supplanted by the supremacy of private interests, states have been reduced to instruments of security with minimal interference in the market, and citizens are consumers of commodities. It is now commonplace to see our interests and education as investments in ourselves. Individuals are good citizens if they develop their human *capital* to make themselves more marketable in the world of work. Similarly, the state's primary role is tethered to its capacity to create the conditions for economic growth, including passing laws in the interests of corporations. Economic growth is both a primary goal and the means to state legitimisation. Even the natural world is ascribed economic value – countries and corporations trade clean air with carbon credits. Pollution clean-up is measured in costs to GDP, although causes of pollution are not. Even the oceans are sites for capital accumulation. In short, the state is seen to be doing a good job if it steers the economy into positive economic growth and increasing commodification (Brown 2015), even if its citizens are growing poorer, more marginalised, unhappier and unemployed, and its natural environment unliveable. States' administrative capacity to act in the public interest has been systematically dismantled. In this way, neoliberal capitalism has remade the state and changed the conditions under which we live. After 30 years of creeping into the rationality of institutions, neoliberalism has engendered a market democracy in which the interests of corporations are elevated into national interests. This neoliberal transfiguration of democracy into 'de-democratised' (Dörre 2019) or undemocratic democracies in which states are not accountable to their populations, acting on the dictates of external corporate powers, spans the centres and peripheries of capitalism.

Transnational corporations have used corporate power to promote their interests and displace public interests through influencing state action (George 2015: 12). They exercise their power through lobbies, transnational agencies, and directly influencing governments by 'convincing elected officials to pass this law or that one, but also through obscure "expert committees" or ad hoc bodies' behind closed doors (George 2015: 1). Through such actions, transnational corporations undermine the 'legitimate authority' of elected governments: 'A broad spectrum of shadowy non-elected people is entrenching neoliberal values and doctrine, orienting government decisions and standing against democracy' (George 2015: 17).

The power of corporations is demonstrated in the many countries passing laws that service the interest of corporations rather than people or the public good. To take one example, the US Supreme Court ruled in favour of Monsanto,⁶ making it virtually impossible for farmers to save seeds to reuse or sell to other farmers. They are thus forced to buy seeds every year from Monsanto, which has sewn up the market in seeds. Another example is the European Commission's adoption of the rules of the International Accounting Standards Board (IASB) as official parameters within which European governments can collect taxes (George 2015: 17). With more and more of these sorts of laws, states slowly shift from legitimate power (accountable to the electorate) to illegitimate power (accountable to corporations) that is concentrated in the hands of the political and economic elite. Neoliberal rationality makes states more concerned with creating the conditions for capitalist accumulation, enhancing the country's competitive edge in the global marketplace and improving credit ratings than with human well-being or ecological sustainability. For the elite (and increasingly it has become commonplace understanding), democracy is about liberty as non-interference, about the freedom to choose in the marketplace.

Another example of neoliberal rationality's insidious creep is the way in which corporations, supranational bodies and national states refer to citizens as stakeholders, consumers and clients. Corporations adopted 'stakeholders' – who are distinct from shareholders – to denote people who have an interest in the corporation's activity but do not have power in the hierarchy. For corporations, their fiduciary duties are limited to 'increase shareholder value. This distinctive requirement leaves out what a company may do to its workers or to the environment in order to attain that end' (George 2015: 7). Thus, the effects of increasing shareholder value can be detrimental to 'stakeholders', such as massive job losses, the decimation of local economies or destruction of the natural environment. In other words, stakeholders have an interest but no power, whereas shareholders have both an interest and power. Governments have adopted similar language, reflecting a shift in their role.

Providing government services to citizens implies a particular relationship between the state and citizens based on the state's public function. This is very different from a state that sees its role as selling services to stakeholders and clients. An equally worrying trend is the use of 'corporate citizens' to refer to corporations. For example, in a 2019 court affidavit by the South African parastatal Eskom, Deloitte is repeatedly referred to as a 'corporate citizen' (Comrie 2020). These are not innocent turns of language but reflect a shift in the locus of power away from the people, away from democratically accountable states.

The amalgamation of corporate power and state power, especially in the US, unleashed a particular type of corporate democracy that represented 'the *political* coming of age of corporate power and the *political* demobilization of the citizenry' (Wolin 2008: xviii, italics in original). In effect, states' goals have increasingly aligned to and are indistinguishable from those of modern firms, especially as firms adopt elements of 'justice', redistribution and sustainability through corporate social responsibility, public relations campaigns and 'green' initiatives. Remaking the state into an apparatus that prioritises economic health sublimates equality, liberty, inclusivity and constitutionalism to this goal. In this way, neoliberal rationality has undermined democratic demands for justice and inclusion and turned the state into an entity modelled on the modern firm with techniques of 'governance' that highlight best practices, performance management and quantitative deliverables.

Under these conditions, freedom has been reduced to consumer choice, dizzying degrees of information widely accessible through social media, networked platforms and advertisements. Brown (2015: 41) explains the implications for liberty: 'As liberty is relocated from political to economic life, it becomes subject to the inherent inequality of the latter and is part of what secures that inequality ... Liberty itself is narrowed to market conduct, divested of association with mastering the conditions of life, existential freedom, or securing the rule of the demos.' Freedom to participate in self-rule has been turned into freedom to compete and consume in the unregulated market. Neoliberal capitalism has not only made corporations more powerful than states and citizens, but has turned states and entire populations into economic entities in the service of markets. Neoliberal rationality has also reinforced the idea that social forces shaping the world, such as structural unemployment, are personal troubles in an individual's milieu (Mills 1959), isolating individuals from broader social and collective communities. Zygmunt Bauman (2001: 106) captures the tendency to look at individual problems rather than the social forces that created them: 'With eyes focused on one's own performance and thus diverted from the social space where the contradictions of individual existence are collectively produced, men and women are naturally tempted to reduce the

complexity of their predicament.' Reducing social issues into personal troubles further undermines democracy as forms of collective action and associational power are weakened.

Neoliberal rationality's slow creep into common language is further reflected in the increasing use of 'governance' instead of 'government' (George 2015). While the meaning of government refers to directing and administering the state, the meaning of governance shifts the emphasis away from democratic control. Governance is often referred to as 'the art of governing without government' as states manage citizens through non-state means and enforce compliance through state security apparatus such as the police (see Duncan, this volume).

Thus, the dramatic rise in corporate power and the withering of state capacity to challenge corporate domination has meant that states have increasingly lost (or sold) their capacity to act in the interests of their electorates. Neoliberal capitalism has smothered democracy with the loss of state sovereignty, violations to the basic rule of law, and erosion of political freedoms in many longstanding democracies such as Greece, the USA and India. The Greek electorate rejected the 2015 referendum on the European Union's (EU's) austerity approach to Greece. The left-leaning prime minister, Alexis Tsipras, ultimately agreed to an EU deal that was in direct contravention of the interest of the people expressed in a democratic referendum. Greece's attempts to stand up to the EU and the 'concessions' ultimately forced on the country demonstrate the power of illegitimate authority and neoliberal rationality. The Greek citizens are merely stakeholders – as opposed to citizens directing their government – in the European Commission's language (George 2015: 7–8).

Similarly, in the US, the capture of the state by corporate power is seen in the money spent by mega-lobbies. Lobbies have been around for well over 150 years and, until recently, registered their activities in an official registry. But with government attempts to further regulate their power, lobbies have found loopholes in legislation with many deregistering and shifting their activities to more opaque forms of control, and through coordinating efforts into highly financed, industry-centred mega-lobbies that influence the allocation of fiscal resources (George 2015: 19–21). To illustrate the enormous amount of money mega-lobbies spend, the pharmaceutical industry and other industries in health products spend the largest lobbying budget in Washington: by the third quarter of 2019, they had spent US\$228 million on lobbying. The US has the most expensive healthcare system in the world with many people unable to afford any healthcare coverage, but these industries make enormous profits and shape government policies through their lobbying. Similarly, gas, oil and other energy and 'natural' resources have consistently spent over US\$91 million on lobbying, while the financial sector, including securities and investment,

commercial banks and real estate collectively, spent well over US\$200 million on lobbying in Washington.⁷ The US financial sector's lobbying efforts resulted in a political coup for the industry. From the 1980s, the sector (banking, securities, insurance and accounting) employed around 3 000 people and spent nearly US\$5 billion to dismantle New Deal era legislation (passed in the 1930s under Franklin Roosevelt) that protected the US economy from crisis for nearly 60 years. Repealing the Glass-Steagall Act of 1933, which separated commercial (retail) banking from investment banking, was a significant victory of these lobbying efforts. President Clinton repealed the Act in 1999, allowing investment banks to 'hide' asset losses from their balance sheets and place them in 'shadow' accounts. These 'toxic derivative products' based on huge consumer debt were bundled together and traded without regulation and oversight (George 2015: 22–25) and laid the basis for the 2007 financial crisis.

Under President Trump's administration the influence of corporate power deepened as he regularly undermined state legitimacy through anti-state rhetoric of the 'deep state' and the appointment of corporate elites to key positions within the government. In 2019, Trump's cabinet included 17 millionaires, two centi-millionaires and one billionaire. Three key cabinet positions were held by three of the richest: billionaire Betsy DeVos as secretary of education, centi-millionaire Wilbur Ross as secretary of commerce and centi-millionaire Steven Mnuchin as secretary of the Treasury. Appointing the super-elite was an overt approach by Trump, who announced to supporters at an election victory speech, 'I want people who have made a fortune' (Tindera 2019). Trump also nominated corporate elites to crucial positions within the state, though he was not always successful in these nominations. For instance, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is a respected scientific agency within the Department of Commerce that focuses on oceans, major waterways and the atmosphere. NOAA provides detailed information to citizens, scientists, government agencies and countries around the world about weather, changing climatic conditions and threats to the planet's climate. In 2017, Trump nominated AccuWeather CEO Barry Meyers to head NOAA, which would constitute a direct conflict of interest. After two years of attempting to get Meyers appointed amid strong resistance, Trump eventually withdrew the nomination in December 2019.⁸ Trump's June 2020 appointment of logistics and shipping businessman and Republican Party mega-donor Louis DeJoy to the postmaster general position⁹ demonstrates the insidious creep of corporate control over a myriad of taken-for-granted state entities. It also demonstrates the importance for democracy of accountable administrative capacity in all sectors of the state. The US Postal Service dates back to the 1770s and is one of the most loved US brands¹⁰

and most reliable state services, though it has faced challenges with the declining mail volume due to online communications. It was particularly vital for the 2020 presidential election as many states opted for mail-in ballots due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In this context, DeJoy announced new rules that would effectively slow down the mail delivery system, and possibly disenfranchise millions of people as their ballots would not arrive in time to be counted. His actions coincided with Trump's derision of the postal service and accusations that mail-in ballots were illegitimate.

In South Africa, neoliberalism has taken on a particularly local character that combines with corruption of public officials and elected leaders. The term 'state capture' characterises the way in which the state has been used to enrich political leaders, especially former president Zuma and his faction in the African National Congress (ANC) and their link to the nefarious Gupta family business empire (see Pillay, this volume). Enormous amounts of public funds have gone into the coffers of political elites and public officials through these corrupt relations. However, there is another threat to hollowing out the state that receives far less attention but is equally detrimental: corporate influence.

Corporations encourage the state to outsource functions that have either historically been in-house or are created as new needs. For example, the 2020 auditor-general's report found that municipalities spent R1.26 billion on consultants in preparing their financial statements, a function that they should be able to do in-house. In another example, a 2020 report by the amaBhungane Centre for Investigative Journalism¹¹ claimed that Eskom (the state-owned energy company in charge of generation, transmission and distribution) awarded tenders to Deloitte for services in which it appears Deloitte influenced the decision-making processes. According to amaBhungane, the dubious relationship between Eskom and Deloitte surrounds a number of contracts that were stacked in favour of Deloitte by high-ranking internal Eskom officials. In 2019, Eskom's then chairperson, Jabu Mabuza, lamented in a court affidavit that the relationship with Deloitte 'indicates the extent to which processes and procedures at state institutions ... can be manipulated so that pre-determined outcomes can be achieved by abuse and improper use of power by those in senior positions [within the state]' (Comrie 2020). Here again, corporate influence and neoliberal rationality combine to shape the performance of a crucial state institution.

Eskom provides approximately 95 per cent of the electricity consumed in South Africa and is a key state asset, but corporate influence together with maladministration, corruption and fraud within the state have undermined its capacity to deliver energy and remain solvent. The efforts to clean up Eskom are proving extremely

difficult as powerful vested interests within the ANC, the state and corporations are deeply embedded in Eskom.

The ANC's 26 years of rule have been marked by its obsession with markets, economic growth and maintaining credit ratings instead of ensuring the politically and constitutionally mandated goals of redistribution, justice and radical democratic forms of rule (see Pillay, Duncan, McKinley, Radebe and Kaaf, this volume). As corruption becomes endemic within the party-state nexus, it threatens the survival of once-crucial state-owned enterprises (e.g. Eskom) and delivery of social services such as education and healthcare. In response, the ANC increasingly combines a dangerous ethnic, nationalist and race-based populism with a renewed commitment to neoliberal rationality. Thus, it ensures freedom for footloose corporations to pollute, exploit and relocate; it focuses the state on managing the population through disciplinary techniques and increasing surveillance; and it passes myriad anti-people laws such as the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Amendment Act 2 of 2019, which reinforces patriarchal traditional leadership in rural areas. The police force has returned to a law-and-order approach characteristic of apartheid, rather than the community policing and public safety approach widely endorsed in the 1990s. As a result, citizens are often met with aggressive policing that undermines the crucial role of voicing discontent in a robust democracy. At the same time, it takes on increasingly xenophobic rhetoric, blaming foreigners and racial minorities (who have lived in South Africa for hundreds of years) for the failures of development.

In addition to the ANC's dysfunctional state, the Economic Freedom Fighters' (EFF's) destructive tactics also undermine key institutions of democracy.¹² For example, democracy requires free and reliable communication through freedom of assembly, press and speech. The EFF undermines these freedoms through threatening critical journalists and independent voices, employing trolls to wreak havoc on social media against critics, threatening protestors and critical voices, and silencing and intimidating alternative views. It has adopted militaristic, male chauvinistic rhetoric for its internal party structures: the leadership structure uses military language, referring to the party leader, Julius Malema, as commander-in-chief and wearing military-style clothing. The other opposition party, the Democratic Alliance (DA), has a deeply pro-market approach that reinforces neoliberal rationality and fails to speak to the interests of the majority of South Africans. It too prioritises creating the conditions for neoliberal markets to thrive, focusing on liberty as non-interference.

These examples show how states have been influenced, shaped and remade. Reducing democracy to liberty as non-interference and participation to voting in

elections, and by dismantling the democratic and accountable administrative capacity of state institutions, the basis was laid for neoliberalism to hollow out democracy from within and enable corporate capture to turn it into 'market democracy'. Slowly eating away at the foundations of democracy, neoliberalism is increasingly showing its violent, intolerant and exclusionary side. In a growing number of places in the world, market democracy has created the conditions for anti-democratic forces to rise, such as right-wing authoritarian leaders and neo-fascist movements that dismantle democracy through its very mechanisms (see Satgar, this volume). We see this in the US with Trump's assault on the basic institutions of democracy (see Gordon and Solty, this volume), in Brazil with Bolsonaro's dismantling of key democratic protections (see Saad-Filho, this volume) and in India with Modi's attack on citizen rights (see Nilsen, this volume). Politics absent strong democratic institutions and democratic publics provides ample ground for states to become authoritarian while maintaining the veneer of democracy. These trends have become more pronounced due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Finally, neoliberal capitalism has also converged with revolutionary changes in information and communications technology (ICT) – through social media, internet sites and the dark web – garnering vast amounts of personal information used to shape public opinion. Rather than enhancing democracy, ICT often undermines it through manipulating elections, undermining democratic debate, spreading misinformation, providing greater space for corporate intrusion into everyday lives and amplifying right-wing voices. In an expansive and robust democracy, democratic deliberation and political decisions can be contested, and are not based on faith or conviction. Reducing fact-based critique to opinions and false information vanquishes the possibility of shared norms and universals that define a democracy. According to Habermas (1991), deliberation among participants engenders legitimacy, fosters shared norms and nurtures democratic capacities. It is also crucial in developing an understanding of issues, and the capacity to contest ideas and build confidence. The circulation of opinions on social media subsumes engaged discussion, and creates conditions for elected leaders to engage the public through sensational messages. Social media takes this to new levels – all that matters is the number of 'shares' and responses messages get, and the more sensational, the more shares. Whether or not the content is true is irrelevant. Trump's claims to alternative facts and the dark web's promotion of conspiracy theories perhaps best represent this phenomenon, but it has been the basis of right-wing propaganda, populist appeals and climate denialism. Reducing politics to communicative acts through social media feeds into the illusion of political efficacy, when in fact it unhinges political practice. Democratic engagement tries to understand issues and not

simply proffer an opinion or sow doubt. Deliberation is aimed at understanding, whereas communicative acts are aimed at broadcasting opinions. Traditional forms of media are also compromised through concentration in ownership and control of the major media houses (see Radebe, this volume), which reinforces the importance of free, accessible, reliable and critical forms of information and media (see McKinley, this volume).

Democracy is clearly not perfect: it can be captured, it can fail, it can be remade, it can promote an anti-democratic ethos. Nevertheless, the ideal of people ruling themselves is worth fighting for if for no other reason than the alternative – rule by others, such as the economic elite – is a ghastly option. Only robust and expansive democracy holds the potential to create a better world in which there is universal human thriving, justice, equality, liberty, inclusion of all people and living within our planetary boundaries. Only robust and expansive democracy allows for redefining the interrealm boundaries between the economy, social reproduction, non-human nature and politics. The task of our times is to engender ‘democracy shorn of its imbrication with capitalism’ (Brown 2015: 12) as the basis on which to build more radical forms of democracy. The foundational rights that ensure freedom – of assembly, speech and the press, as well as the impartiality of the law to treat all people equally – were victories won through people’s struggles and are central to social, economic and ecological justice. Our task is not to discard liberal democracy, but to recognise its limits and build on its foundational pillars. The question is, how do we remake – democratise – democracy?

RECLAIMING DEMOCRACY

While some on the Left argue that democracy is a liberal invention and highlight the failure of ‘actually existing democracy’ (Dean 2009; Žižek 2004), the critique ends by rejecting democracy as radical ideal, as political practice and as a basis for law and easily slides into authoritarianism. It ignores the history of struggle over democracy. While democracy has been transmogrified through its instantiation with capitalism, democratic struggles have won important universal rights: suffrage, education, human rights, civil rights, and freedom of association, speech and the press. For over 200 years, these rights were fought for and won by working classes, the excluded, the racially oppressed, women, sexual minorities and ordinary people.

The industrial working classes made democratic claims for a greater share in the economic and political structures of society. Workers pushed for more redistributive demands and increased egalitarianism. The Swedish working class registered

its interests through the Social Democratic Party, US workers were instrumental in redistributive gains in the early and mid-twentieth century, and studies show that strong labour movements produce more redistributive outcomes (Ahluquist 2017; Pontusson 2013; Webster and Englert 2020). In South Africa, labour was a crucial democratising force ensuring many of the democratic victories of the 1990s. Redistributive gains and public goods such as security of employment, maternity leave, working hours, paid holidays, pension funds, public education, transport and health were victories of working-class people. Many of these struggles envisioned and demanded more robust forms of democracy that sought justice (substantive equality) and a broader conception of liberty (protection from arbitrary power).

Yet, today we live in market democracies. Most are narrow democracies in which corporations have enormous power to shape national agendas and laws and have systematically rolled back many democratic victories. Political parties that once fought for the interests of working classes, the poor and marginalised, slowly eroded their resistance to neoliberalism, adopting euphemisms like Blair and Clinton's 'Third Way social democracy' and the ANC's 'deracialising of capitalism'. It is no surprise that the Labour Party in the UK, the Democratic Party in the US, the Social Democratic Party in Germany, the Congress Party in India and the ANC in South Africa are in crisis.

Karl Polanyi (1944) captured the pendulum of history in *The Great Transformation*, in which he discusses the continual tension between the self-regulating market and society's attempts to protect itself from the ravages of the market. Polanyi shows how the social destruction caused by the self-regulating market can lead to fascism. His work reads like a warning for our times. While Polanyi does not frame it in terms of democracy per se, his analysis can also be seen as the struggle between two types of democracy. In the one, the state restricts popular forces and ensures power is concentrated in the hands of the ruling classes. In the other, the state protects society from the market and facilitates democratic deepening by creating spaces for popular control over the commons and public goods. While market democracy is certainly the overarching arc of history, there continue to be extraordinary experiments looking to reclaim democracy through more expansive notions of liberty, equality and justice. What would Polanyi's double movement entail if it were to reflect a more expansive democracy?

Robust and expansive democracy that overcomes the economic and political divide, that foregrounds social reproduction and non-human nature allows for human existence to move beyond the 'realm of necessity' by laying the basis for the 'realm of freedom' (Marx 1972: 441). In other words, expansive democracy offers the potential to resolve the interrealm boundary struggles and create the conditions for new social

relations based on social, economic and ecological justice. In the 1970s the Marxist Left elaborated some of the most important debates about the state and the role of democracy (Althusser 1971; Hall 1980, 1982; Jessop 1990; Miliband 1969; Poulantzas 1972, 1978). By the late twentieth century, much of the Left neglected to think about the changing nature of the state and its relationship to capital, subaltern classes and social transformation. Rosa Luxemburg warned against neglecting the importance of democracy in her debate with the anti-democratic position of Lenin and Trotsky, who advocated for dissolving the Russian constituent assembly in the early twentieth century. Luxemburg argued instead for more democracy:

And the more democratic the institutions, the livelier and stronger the pulse-beat of the political life of the masses, the more direct and complete is their influence ... To be sure, every democratic institution has its limits and shortcomings, things which it doubtless shares with all other human institutions. But the remedy which Trotsky and Lenin have found, the elimination of democracy as such, is worse than the disease it is supposed to cure; for it stops up the very living source from which alone can come correction of all the innate shortcomings of social institutions. That source is the active, untrammelled, energetic political life of the broadest masses of the people. (Luxemburg 2004: 310)

We must learn from the limits of liberal democracy, but we must also heed Luxemburg's warning against jettisoning the idea of people's rule. While modern liberal democracy has always been realised in conjunction with capitalism and imbued by certain capitalist values and powers, it has nevertheless provided 'the language and promise of inclusive and shared political equality, freedom, and popular sovereignty' (Brown 2015: 44). Democracy is the only form of rule in which people can collectively rule and share in the powers of governing.

The more expansive form of democracy continues to find its mooring in local communities, social movements and popular struggles for a more egalitarian world. Democratic experiments are happening around the world in cooperative forms of production, consumption and finance, participatory budgeting, local community-owned energy grids, alternative currencies, transition towns and local food movements. There are calls to strengthen state accountability to citizens' demands and increase capacity to deliver public goods. Taken together these experiments are developing prefigurative practices involving new forms of power, the reproduction of the commons, democratic self-management and democratising state institutions. They are recalibrating the inter-realm boundaries between the economy and social reproduction, the natural world and public power in order to retool economic activity in the service of society.

The history of democracy makes clear that it is an ongoing process, an ongoing struggle. It is time to reclaim democracy to become genuinely people-centred, to create a better, more just, more egalitarian world. Democracy is not perfect, but it remains the only form of government where people collectively govern themselves. As South African scholar-activist Rick Turner (1972) wrote over 40 years ago, building a robust democracy requires utopian thinking.

NOTES

- 1 I use neoliberal capitalism and neoliberalism interchangeably to mean the latest variant of capitalism. For discussion of the varieties of capitalism, see Soskice and Hall (2001).
- 2 Mercantile capitalism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, laissez faire capitalism of the nineteenth century, state-managed monopoly capitalism of the second half of the twentieth century, and neoliberal capitalism – the latest variant of capitalism’s organisation of social relations – that began in the 1980s.
- 3 While Trump is no longer in power in the US, the argument in this chapter (and in the volume as a whole) remains valid as the underlying conditions of neoliberal financialised and globalised capitalism remain in place. The threat of authoritarian politics remains very real in the US as indicated by the fact that 73 million people voted for Trump.
- 4 This is the position of classical liberal democracy. There is a long history within liberalism with important and significant differences among the different strands (classical liberals, egalitarian liberals, social justice liberals, republicans). Here I primarily refer to the classical liberal tradition.
- 5 George (2015: 8) highlights key aspects of legitimate power in democracies: ‘free and fair elections for designating officials to represent the people, constitutional government, the rule of law, equality before the law, separation of executive, legislative and judicial powers, checks and balances to prevent any one part of government from becoming too powerful, the separation of church and state. All these are crowned by the general notion of the “consent of the governed”.’
- 6 See <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/14/business/monsanto-victorious-in-genetic-seed-case.html>. Monsanto was bought by Bayer in 2018.
- 7 All the data on lobbying in 2019 are from Open Secrets, <https://www.opensecrets.org/news/2019/10/big-pharma-continues-to-top-lobbying-spending/> and <https://www.opensecrets.org/industries/lobbying.php?cycle=1998&ind=F03> (accessed 19 August 2020).
- 8 In September 2020 Trump succeeded in appointing climate science denier David Legates as NOAA’s deputy assistant secretary of commerce.
- 9 Postmasters general have typically come through the ranks of the postal system. DeJoy’s appointment therefore diverges from historical practice. There was speculation that Trump intended to privatise the US Postal Service, and DeJoy’s appointment appears to be in line with this.
- 10 See <https://morningconsult.com/most-loved-brands-2020/> (accessed 23 November 2020).
- 11 The information in this section is from amaBhungane’s report by Susan Comrie (2020).
- 12 The EFF is an opposition party formed in 2013 by expelled and disgruntled ANC members, most notably the former leader of the ANC Youth League. For an excellent analysis of the neo-fascism of the EFF, see Satgar (2019) and Habib (2019).

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